Opinion

Etruscan literacy in Spina

Abbreviations: REE, rivista di epigrafia etrusca; REI, rivista di epigrafia italic; VP, valle pega; VT, valle trebba

Introduction

I would like to discuss Etruscan Literacy in Spina that is Etruscan Literacy in a settlement that does not belong to Tyrrhenian Etruria, but to the Padan area, in the Southern part of the coastal lagoon which separates Istria from Romagna. Furthermore, I will discuss Etruscan Literacy in a location which, according to some ancient authors, is not even an Etruscan city. According to Pliny the Elder (Nat 3,16),[1–4] Diomedes, the Thracian king, probably founded it. Pseudo-Scylax (§17)[5] believed that Spina is Greek; finally, according to Strabo (5, 1, 7), it is a *hellenis polis*. The "Greekness" or the attachment of Spinetan people to the values of Hellenism is confirmed by a few ancient authors (Str 5. 1. 7; 9. 3. 8; Plin. *Nat*. 3. 16) Who mention a Spinetan treasure in the sanctuary of Delphi.

Although Spina was strongly marked by the Greeks and although Spina was located far from Etrusco phone Italy, we can talk about Etruscan Literacy in Spina because the Etruscan language was truly spoken and written there. However the Etruscan tongue was used in a community where other languages were known, Greek of course, but also Venetan and Gaulish. The coexistence of several languages in Spina has struck a number of modern scholars and, in the last few years, has led some of them to give the Spinetan society the image of a community, where the integration of non-indigenous populations was successful.[6,7]

I would like to submit this image of a tolerant melting-pot to the test of epigraphical data: Did all the languages have the same importance and the same function in the eyes of the Spinetan people? All in all, was there a linguistic hierarchy? If so, what was the position of the Etruscan language in this hierarchy?

Polyglot spina

In order to understand the position of the Etruscan language in Spina, I must first go back to the linguistic situation of Spina, because it is very complex. Three languages, at least were known in Spina.

A. Venetan which derives from Etruscan and which was probably spoken in Spina, if we believe the ancient historians and ten inscriptions in Venetan discovered in Spina. Even if these inscriptions are very short and sometimes hard to decipher, the Venetan nature of the onomastics and of the spelling is absolutely certain. For example: REI 1974, n° 1, 348: *ka.i.mo.i.* REI 1978, n° 1, 394 :)-*o.i.θu*-(REI 1978, n° 2, 394-395: kone *REI* 1973, p. 385, n. 1: *mo*. The Venetan inscriptions represent about 6 per cent of all the inscriptions in Spina, which is not much, but we should probably imagine a broader usage of Venetan than what the few Venetan inscriptions make us believe. Indeed we must also take into account the influence of Venetan in the formation of proper names such as Usti, Upu, Pitamn, and Fukiu.[8,9] The EthniCon of the Venetan people also seems preserved in an Enesiu form as a result of a Greek mediation in a Spinetan inscription (VP, 416 C).[10]

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B. The Greek language is attested by many more inscriptions. If we put aside sigla and inscriptions with less than three letters, we note 17 Greek edited inscriptions, which make Spina one of the richest settlements in the West concerning Greek inscriptions.[11,12] Most of these Greek inscriptions are very short and give us a proper name as Xanthippus on two Attic oinochoai (VT 709);[13,14] Tuchandros (VT 601);[14,15] Kritonos (VT 630).[14,15] These Greek inscriptions represent 27% of all the edited inscriptions in Spina and most of them belong to funerary contexts. Greek, like Venetan, played a large part in the formation of many proper Spinetan names. Here are a few examples: Platunalu (VT 623)[1], where one can see the Greek name Platôn and the suffix-alu, which is common in Padan Etruria; Tata Kephlei (settlement), where Kephlei derives probably from the Greek Kephalos; Laris Akleś (VT 1175)[15] with akles which derives from Achilleus.

C. Finally, the Etruscan language, whose 180 inscriptions were discovered in the settlement and above all in the necropolis of Valle Trebba and Valle Pega between the 6th and 3rd century BC. These inscriptions were written in an alphabet which was used in Northern Etruria and had a private nature.

To this brief review we can finally add Celtic, spoken by the Gauls, who threatened Spinetan people.[17–19] There doesn't exist any epigraphic proof of Gaulish inscriptions in Spina, but we can find traces of Gaulish in some Spinetan names, such as Keltie,[10,17] Pratalu,[20] Raukvalu,[10,17] Treute.[10,17]

Spina: between greek and etruscan

Of all the languages, Etruscan occupies a dominant position in terms of the quantity of inscriptions. This doesn't mean that the culture of reference or that the dominant culture was exclusively and necessarily Etruscan. It should not be forgotten that the imaginary realm of the Spinetan people was primordialy Greek. The first excavators marveled at the abundance of Greek pottery discovered on the site: about 10,000 to 12,000 vases.[21] Indeed, in the years between 480 BC and the middle of the 4th century BC, the arrival of Attic pottery was massive: there were often banquet vases, of monumental sizes and decorated by major painters and the subjects were often linked to the history of Athens, like the adventures of Theseus or the Amazanomachy.[22]

[1]*REE* 1993, I

Excavations also showed that some Greek rites of passage were carried out in Spina. For example, some Spinetan tombs housed two choes similar to those Attic three year-olds toddlers received on the second day of the Anthesteria, in order to symbolize their belonging to the civic community. In a tomb of Valle Trebba, there was a lebes, a typically Greek wedding present, intended to contain the bride's bathwater. Finally, some urns made of white Aegean marble and some lekythoi with white bottoms contained the ashes of the dead. Sometimes, the Spinetans even copied Greek manners: for example, they made Epinetra like those Greek women used to spin wool. Consequently, we see that the language is not a sufficient criterion to measure the attachment of a population to a given culture. Spinetan people usually wrote in Etruscan, but they enjoyed living like the Greeks. In a previous paper, I showed that this ostensible display of Greek objects did not come with a complete understanding of the images of these Greek vases. Furthermore, all the Greek manners were not followed in Spinetan banquets: Etruscan women were not excluded from the banquets and wine did not seem consumed as much as in Greece.[23]

We can explain this behaviour by the Spinetan people's attraction to Greece; Greeks were their main trading partners of the Spinetans. Thus accumulating Greek goods was used gave the Spinetan people a high social status. It is also possible that epigraphic evidence doesn't allow us to measure the exact degree of literacy of a population correctly. The Greek inscriptions are too few and among them trademarks having a useful value are so numerous that we can wonder whether a lot of Spinetans knew Greek well. Indeed, all the Greek inscriptions are written on Greek pottery. Most of the Greek inscriptions of

ownership are perhaps simply inscriptions which were engraved in Greece on vases destined for trade and then sold to the Spinetans. As for the few inscriptions with theonyms, these inscriptions could not have served as dedications, but could have been used as *grammatika ekpomata*, or "lettered drinking-cups". A healthy deity's name was engraved or drawn right on these cups from the beginning, in order to be used during libations in banquets.[14,24–26] So Greek writing could have been understood as a series of pictures and used above all as decorative illustrations.[27]

On the contrary Etruscan writing is present everywhere in Spina. As regards the quantity, it represents 90% of the Spinetan inscriptions and Etruscan inscriptions are found in the urban area as well as in the funerary contexts of Spina. Most of them are funerary inscriptions of ownership, but we would be wrong if we limited Spinetan epigraphy to this sort of inscription. In Spina, an impressive quantity of alphabets was discovered. In absolute terms they do not represent a significant quantity (11), but, if we compare them to the total quantity of Etruscan alphabets,[28] we note that this concentration is particularly strong, almost 15 %.

The relative profusion of alphabets in Spina must be placed in the context of predilection for such inscriptions as I will refer to them as "alphabets" from now on. In Padan Etruria alone, we know of 35 alphabets, that is nearly half of all the Etruscan alphabets. Regarding the particular case of Spina, we cannot explain this phenomenon by the importance of the excavations in Spina, because Spina has not been quite as much excavated as Veio, Tarquinia or Orvieto. So this profusion is not due to incidental factors, but to the value of Etruscan writing for the Spinetan people (Table 1).

Table 1 Quantity of alphabets in different sites of Padan Etruria

Sites of padan etruria and northern italy	Quantity of alphabets
Spina	11
Bologna	10
Marzabotto	9
S. Polo d'Enza	1
S. Martino in Gattara	1
Mantova	1
Adria	1
Genova	1
Prestino presso Como	1

Spina and etruscan literacy

Perhaps the concentration of alphabets has to be linked to the distance of Etrusco phone population of Padan Etruria from the major cultural centers of Tyrrhenian Etruria. Etrusco phone people could have been all the more attached to Etruscan language that they felt isolated in Etrusco phone enclaves in a territory where people spoke Venetan, Greek, ombrian and Gaulish. Two elements lead us to think that we must continue to search for the reason of their presence in this Spinetan attachment for the Etruscan writing.

A. The specific location of these alphabets, while, in Tyrrhenian Etruria, most of the alphabets have been set in tombs, in Padan Etruria, in particular in Spina, all except one have

been discovered in urban areas.[28] It is all more surprising that until now most of the excavations have been carried out in the necropolis of Valle Trebba and Valle Pega, where about 4 000 tombs have been discovered. On the contrary the urban settlement has not been systematically excavated for practical reasons.[29–34] So alphabets were designed to be seen within the family circle.

B. In Spina almost all of the alphabets discovered in the urban area were partial. This is an exceptional phenomenon, because we know only of 8 examples of partial alphabets in Tyrrhenian and Companion Etruria. In Spina we cannot explain this particularity by the material conditions: all the

vases on which the alphabets are written were large enough for a complete alphabet. So we cannot certify that most of the Spinetan alphabets were used for teaching how to read and write. With three letters, for example, what could their use have been? We could answer that these alphabets were referential and allusive; by metonymy, the mention of a few letters was enough to evoke the entire alphabet. The owner of a partial alphabet showed indeed that he possessed the knowledge or the power of writing. He did not even need a primer to show that he knew the entire alphabet from beginning to end[35] or he could at least begin the alphabetical series.[36] The answer becomes more complex if we examine the location of these alphabets. Until now I have spoken about the urban area of Spina, but the exact definition of the places where these alphabets were found is open for discussion. This is the case with the inscription III, 27 discovered in sector 12 II C of the urban area of Spina.[37] Indeed sectors 11 and 12 sheltered a rectangular building which has been partially destroyed by the modern works of canalization: the excavated surface measures 10, 50 m from East to West and 8, 50 m from North to South and is divided into three rooms.[33] One can wonder about the inscription III, 28 too discovered in a wide building which occupies a great part of square 8, where stakes and bundles were equally discovered. The arguments which allow us to consider these buildings as houses rely on the context of their discovery, on the remains of meals and on the fragments of vessels found on the floor. So in what looks like houses, alphabets could serve as decoration and as I said the inhabitants of Spina were proud they could write in Etruscan.

Writing and the origins

So the Spinetans were not interested in the fact of writing or in writing in itself. The interest in writing was linked to the language of writing. In this case the Spinetans would keep and fix Etruscan writing, not Greek writing. Etruscan writing was used for the living and for the dead alike, but alphabets were intended above all for the living. It seems difficult, however, to give most of these alphabets a merely ornamental value. All the alphabets were engraved with such small letters that one cannot read them easily. Without these letters, many plates would not be precious because most of them were plates of local or Etrusco-campanian production and were used on an everyday basis. On most of these objects, letters were engraved without special care given to symmetry or superposition.

We can wonder whether we should reexamine the interpretation of these buildings as houses. Indeed some of the objects which have been found in these buildings have unusual features. In the building of sectors 11 and 12, a small biconic olla in impasto, with a proto historic appearance, has been discovered. Its form is unusual in Spina, where miniature olla and ovoid olla in impasto are found.[33] Is it a foundation offering? It is difficult to say it. We also hesitate to suggest such an interpretation for an exceptional amphora in bucchero which is decorated with small circles and which has been discovered in the building of sector 8-III, in the archaic strata.[33]

I would not go as far as to say that the buildings in which these objects have been discovered are not houses, but I wonder about a possible sacred value of alphabets which have been found there. The two contexts which appear to be the most linked with alphabets of Etruria are funerary and sacred contexts, the latter being the most common for the partial alphabets (Table 2). The most famous case is that of the building at Casale Pian Roseto, near Veio, where 4 alphabets with only the first two letters of the alphabet, were discovered. This building has been identified by M Torelli[38] as a rural sanctuary.[38]

Table 2 Sacred contexts of alphabets in Etruria

Number in pandolfini & prosdocimi 1990	Site	Context	Date	Text
II, 4	Castro	Votive deposit?	Late 6th century BC?	ạ c e v z ḥ
III, 3	Roselle	Votive deposit	6th century- early 5th century	a c
III, 4	Tarquinia	Sacred area?	Late 6th century - early 5th century	a c
III, 11	Veio (Casale Pian Roseto)	Sanctuary	Early 5th century	a c
III, 12	Veio (Casale Pian Roseto)	Sanctuary	Early 5th century	a c
III, 13	Veio (Casale Pian Roseto)	Sanctuary	Early 5th century	a c
III, 14	Veio (Casale Pian Roseto)	Sanctuary	Early 5th century	a c
III, 16	Sasso di Furbara	Sanctuary	Late 6th century -first half of the 5th century	a e v ẓ [- - -]

In the Greek world, we note a profusion of partial alphabets in sacred contexts. For example, the most ancient partial alphabets in Greek come from Mount Hymettos and date from the 6th century BC.[39–42] For a long time specialists gave them an ornamental function, but this explanation has been contested by R Thomas[43] Rosalind Thomas links this wealth of inscriptions on the Mount Hymetios to the sanctuary of Zeus Semios. People there offered any kind of object to this god, as long as it was written, weather signs and written signs.

Finally, it would be strange that the urban area of Spina did not have sacred spaces like most of the ortho normal Etruscan cities of Padan Etruria.[30,44] Marzabotto had its Tin temple.[45,46] What temples did Spina have? In Spina there could not exist an imposing temple such as the Tin temple in Marzabotto, because the geological and hydrographic conditions were different. Because of the lagoon and the lack of quarries, temples were probably made of wood and mud. That is why no sanctuary could be identified until now in Spina.

For the moment there is no proof that the buildings of sectors 8, 11 and 12 were cult spaces. The ground was so upturned by the alluvia that we are forced to rely on very few clues. However we cannot abandon the idea that Etruscan writing had a sacred value, maybe a magic value for the Spinetan people. We can think that these alphabets had a patrimonial function, because they were destined to

be an inheritance passed down to the living and not to the dead. What was thus passed down from a one generation to the next? Certainly precious knowledge may be an element of Etruscan identity, because Spinetan people were distant from the centers of Etruscan culture and from the cities of origin of the first Etruscan settlers in the Padan area. So we can conclude that alphabets were not only markers of identity,[47] but also reminders of the Etruscan origins of the emporion.[48−50]

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest in publishing the article.

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